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THE FIRST REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION

THE convention which met in Pittsburg on the 22d of February, 1856, for the purpose of organizing a national Republican party, was called together by the chairmen of the Republican state committees of Ohio, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Wisconsin. It was not a convention of delegates selected by constituent assemblies of the people, but a mass convention of men who favored the formation of a great national anti-slavery party and who volunteered their services in the undertaking. It was in session two days, and its purpose was fully accomplished, but the report of its proceedings in the newspapers of the time was meagre and inadequate. They were published in pamphlet soon after the convention, but they covered only a few pages, being a mere skeleton of what happened and even less satisfactory than the newspaper reports, while they gave the reader no conception of the spirit and character of the gathering. No roll of the members was preserved, while the several histories of political parties and conventions which have since appeared contain little more than a mere reference to the subject. Since the writer is one of the very few survivors of the convention, and was officially and somewhat actively connected with its proceedings, and since there is always a natural curiosity to know something of the beginnings of a great historic movement, perhaps a brief paper on the subject may prove timely and not entirely without value as a contribution to the literature of politics.

The creation of the proposed new party was a vexed problem. The Whig party had received its death-blow in the presidential campaign of 1852, but it still had a lingering and fragmentary existence. In Michigan its members had united with the Free Soilers and bolting Democrats in state convention as early as July 6, 1854, in forming a Republican party and giving it that name, and this action was followed soon after by like movements in Wisconsin and Vermont. In New York and Massachusetts the Whigs refused to disband, and thus prevented the desired action in these states during the years 1854 and 1855. In Indiana a combination was formed consisting of conservative Whigs, anti-Nebraska Democrats, Know-nothings and Free Soilers. It called itself "the People's Party," and for three years in succession, beginning in 1854, it disowned the name

Republican and subordinated every question of principle to its desire for political success. The situation was most humiliating, but with the nomination of Frémont, Indiana finally started upon its journey out of the wilderness. The formation of a new party in Illinois in 1854 was attempted, but was defeated by the Whigs, who persuaded Abraham Lincoln to avoid any connection with such a movement. The political elements in that state were similar to those in Indiana. In Ohio the new party was launched in 1854 on the basis of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and opposition to the extension of slavery, and Mr. Chase was chosen senator in 1855. Like action was taken in Iowa. In Maine, as in Pennsylvania, a Republican party was not formed till 1856. The Whigs of the northern states generally, and a large proportion of the anti-Nebraska Democrats, finally found their way into the Republican camp through the lodges of Know-nothingism, which served as a convenient escape from their old political bosses. This secret political movement still further complicated the situation. Its action had a two-fold effect. On the one hand, it did good service in the breaking up of the old parties which had so long stood as the bulwarks of slavery; but on the other, its crusade against the Pope and the foreigner tended to balk the rising popular indignation caused by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and thus to divide the people upon side issues instead of uniting them as one man on the single question of slavery. In 1855, Know-nothingism elected the governors of nine northern states and forty-three members of the national House of Representatives. It acted in the dark, and thus fearfully aggravated the political confusion and bewilderment of the times.

A very formidable element had to be reckoned with in the old Free Soil party, which rejoiced in the omens of an anti-slavery revival, but demanded the recognition of its principles in the new organization. This party had given over 291,000 votes in 1848, but four years later it gave only a little over 156,000. This falling off was chiefly caused by the Barnburners of New York and their sympathizers, who had rallied under the Free Soil banner in 1848 for the purpose of punishing their party for throwing Van Buren overboard in 1844, and who now returned to the party fold. The Free Soilers of 1852 however were stronger without this trading element than with it. They stood upon a magnificent platform, and they had the courage of their convictions; and they so commanded the respect of all parties that in 1853, before the repeal of the Missouri Compromise had been attempted, concerted measures had been extensively set on foot for the formation of a national anti-

slavery party consisting of Free Soilers, disbanded Whigs and dissatisfied Democrats. It is morally if not logically certain that such a party would have been organized, and would finally have triumphed if the repeal of the Missouri Compromise had never been proposed. The Free Soilers, however, were not partisans, and they were perfectly willing to disband their organization and lose themselves in a larger movement committed to the essential articles of their political faith. We ought to add, perhaps, that there was still another element which demanded attention in all the states. This was the temperance reform as expounded and enforced in Maine. This movement was then in its first stages, and its progress was amazing. Its champions were on fire with zeal, and their devotion to their cause was a passion. They disputed the proposition that slavery was the paramount question in our politics. Their demand was for the search, seizure, confiscation and destruction of liquors kept for illegal sale. The rum-seller was to be dealt with as a criminal, and the whole fabric of intemperance overthrown by the fiat of legislative prohibition. Such was the political situation in 1856. While the disruption of the old parties seemed easy and imminent, it was equally clear that the organization of their fragments into a new party on a true basis was a totally different problem.

The convention assembled at eleven o'clock in La Fayette Hall, a building which disappeared years ago to make room for a larger structure. It was called to order by Hon. Lawrence Brainerd, of Vermont, who read the call upon which it had convened and asked John A. King, of New York, a son of Rufus King, to act as temporary chairman. After brief and appropriate remarks, Mr. King called on the Rev. Owen Lovejoy, who was present as a representative from Illinois, to open the proceedings with prayer. The name of Lovejoy was an inspiration, for it recalled the murder of his brother by a mob at Alton in 1837, for merely exercising his constitutional right of free speech in a free state in talking about slavery. The heart of the people was manifestly and fervently with him, and there was a suppressed murmur of applause when he asked God to enlighten the mind of the President of the United States, and turn him from his evil ways, and if this was not possible, to take him away, so that an honest and God-fearing man might fill his place. A committee on permanent organization was then appointed, and while it was engaged in its work in an adjoining room the people seemed to be hungry for speeches. When Horace Greeley, with his earnest, kindly face and long white coat, was seen in the audience, he was enthusiastically called for. On taking the platform, he was received with prolonged cheers. He did not speak

at length, but said he had been in Washington several weeks, and that our friends there counselled extreme caution in our movements. He referred to the fact that the powers of the Federal government were in the hands of our enemies, mentioning particularly Jefferson Davis, the Secretary of War, from whom we could count upon no favors. The burden of his speech was the necessity for great caution and moderation on our part. This caused some surprise in the audience, as Mr. Greeley had not been generally regarded as a special exemplar of the virtues he commended; and he afterwards explained himself in the *Tribune* by saying that he had reference to large numbers of good men who had joined the Know-nothing or American party who were at heart entirely with us, and he did not wish to antagonize them in any way in the proceedings of the convention. At the close of Mr. Greeley's remarks, Mr. Giddings was tumultuously called for, and responded by saying that Washington was the last place in the world to look for council or redress, and illustrated his meaning by relating an anecdote of two pious brothers named Joseph and John who in early times had begun a settlement in the West. Joseph prayed, "O Lord! we have begun a good work; we pray Thee to carry it on thus," giving specific directions. But John prayed, "O Lord! we have begun a good work; carry it on as You think best, and don't mind what Joe says." Mr. Giddings then introduced the Rev. Owen Lovejoy, of Illinois, "Not Joe, but John." Mr. Lovejoy's speech was characteristic. It was full of fire, denouncing the administration of Franklin Pierce and the interference of border-ruffians from Missouri with the affairs of Kansas. He hoped that the proceedings in that state would arouse such a storm of indignation as would show itself in Kansas and make every man a martyr rather than submit to the infamous laws of the Lecompton legislature. "Who would not lose his life in such a cause? In defense of Kansas I will offer myself as a captain, and if not wanted in that capacity, I will shoulder a gun and go as a private. If I use my Sharp's rifle, I will shoot in God's name. I am for war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt, if it must be so." Preston King, of New York, was called on for a speech, but excused himself, when Col. Gibson, of Ohio, being loudly called for, addressed the convention on the Know-nothing movement. I think he was then without a rival in the West as a stump speaker. There was an irresistible fascination in his oratory which recalled that of Prentiss of Mississippi in his palmy days. No audience could ever grow tired of listening to him.

Simeon Draper of New York, from the committee on organization, now reported the following permanent officers :

President, Francis P. Blair, of Maryland ; vice-presidents, Horatio G. Russ, New Hampshire ; Lawrence Brainerd, Vermont ; George Bliss, Massachusetts ; James M. Bunce, Connecticut ; R. G. Hazard, Rhode Island ; E. D. Morgan, New York ; W. P. Sherman, New Jersey ; Joseph Farley, Virginia ; Gen. Joseph Markle, Pennsylvania ; W. S. Bailey, Kentucky ; W. Penn Clarke, Iowa ; R. P. Spalding, Ohio ; George W. Julian, Indiana ; John H. McMillan, Illinois ; Gov. Kinsley S. Bingham, Michigan ; David Jones, Wisconsin ; T. P. Newton, Minnesota ; Lewis Clephane, District of Columbia ; secretaries, Russell Errett, Pennsylvania ; D. R. Tilden, Ohio ; Isaac Dayton, New York ; John C. Vaughn, Illinois ; J. W. Stone, Massachusetts.

Mr. Blair was escorted to the chair by Preston King of New York and Jacob Brinkerhoff of Ohio, and was greeted with unbounded enthusiasm. He was in feeble health, and probably the oldest man in the convention. He was a journalist of distinction and a politician of national reputation. He was a soldier in our last war with England and was everywhere known as the trusted friend of Gen. Jackson. He had separated from his party in 1848, and given his vote for Van Buren and Adams, and he appeared in this convention as one of the representatives of the South, which had delegates from Texas, Kentucky, Missouri, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina and Tennessee. Upon taking the chair, Mr. Blair remarked that this was the first speech he had ever been called on to make, and that he could not refrain from expressing how much he felt honored by the action of the convention in making him its president. He considered it, however, more as a compliment to the men with whom he had been associated and whom he represented than to any personal merit. He submitted a paper which he commended to the consideration of the convention as the platform of his Southern friends. It was not acted on. It was remarkably well written and evidently prepared with great care ; but he strangely misconceived the spirit and purpose of the convention. His anti-slavery ideal was the Compromise of 1850, which had abandoned the Wilmot Proviso and paved the way for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise ; and he now demanded the restoration of that Compromise as the sole panacea for our troubles. The convention was not beating a retreat to the finality platforms of 1852, but marching in the opposite direction. At the conclusion of Mr. Blair's remarks a recess was taken.

At the afternoon session Abijah Mann, of New York, offered a resolution which was adopted, that a committee of one from each state be appointed to draw up an address and resolutions for the

consideration of the convention. The following committee was selected : Abijah Mann, of New York ; George M. Weston, Maine ; F. C. Johnson, New Hampshire ; Lawrence Brainerd, Vermont ; E. R. Hoar, Massachusetts ; ex-Gov. Chauncey F. Cleveland, Connecticut ; R. G. Hazard, Rhode Island ; F. Devereaux, New Jersey ; John Allison, Pennsylvania ; W. H. Dennison, Delaware ; Francis P. Blair, Maryland ; James S. Farley, Virginia ; James Redpath, Missouri ; W. S. Bailey, Kentucky ; D. H. Spratt, California ; C. G. Hawthorne, Iowa ; James Dennison, Ohio ; Oliver P. Morton, Indiana ; John C. Vaughn, Illinois ; Jacob M. Howard, Michigan ; Israel Love, Wisconsin ; S. N. Wood, Kansas ; T. M. Houston, Minnesota ; Lewis Clephane, District of Columbia.

The appointment of a committee on national organization was the next business in order, and was discussed at some length. It was finally decided that this committee should consist of one member from each state, and it was constituted as follows : Abner Hallowell, Maine ; J. C. Beman, New Hampshire ; Charles G. Davis, Massachusetts ; Mark Howell, Connecticut ; R. G. Hazard, Rhode Island ; William A. Sackett, New York ; C. M. K. Pollison, New Jersey ; William H. Dennison, Delaware ; William B. Thomas, Pennsylvania ; F. Kemper, Missouri ; W. S. Bailey, Kentucky ; A. J. Stevens, Iowa ; Charles Reemelin, Ohio ; George W. Julian, Indiana ; Owen Lovejoy, Illinois ; Zachariah Chandler, Michigan ; Charles Durkee, Wisconsin.

At this point, the presiding officer read a despatch from Philadelphia which he had just received, relative to the proceedings of the National Council of the American, or Know-nothing, party, which was then in session. It was as follows :

“ PHILADELPHIA, PA., Feb. 22, 1856.

“ The American party is no longer a unit. The national council has gone to pieces. Raise the Republican banner. The North Americans are with you.

THOMAS SPOONER.”

The dispatch was loudly cheered by the convention. Speech-making now became the order of the day, and Preston King, Charles Reemelin, George W. Julian, Joshua R. Giddings and D. Ripley, of New Jersey, all addressed the convention at some length. Mr. King spoke in his customary tone of kindness and conciliation, and his hopeful view of the progress of freedom and the outcome of the new movement was heartily responded to by the audience. By far the strongest speech of the convention was that of Charles Reemelin, then a prominent and influential German politician of

Cincinnati, who died a few years ago. His arraignment of Know-nothingism as a scheme of bigotry and intolerance, and a mischievous side-issue, was vigorous and unsparing. He was a Democrat, but the course of his party had made him an independent. He was a man of recognized ability and integrity, and his utterances were enthusiastically applauded. Mr. Julian spoke on the same subject and expressed kindred views. Mr. Giddings made one of his happiest efforts. He gave an amusing account of the recent struggle for the speakership which resulted in the election of Banks, interspersed with anecdotes which provoked roars of laughter and cheers. He was constitutionally hopeful, touching the progress of the anti-slavery cause, but recent events had given him new accessions of faith, and he poured himself forth in jubilant anticipations which seemed to be as delightful to his hearers as to himself. But the last speaker, Mr. Ripley, created the sensation of the day. He began by giving an account of his experience in the lumber business, and called himself "the saw-log man." The relevancy of his remarks to the business of the convention was exceedingly remote, and he was several times called to order; but the drollery of his effort and the flashes of humor which lighted up his backwoods style of oratory disarmed opposition, and he was allowed to proceed. It was said at the time that his speech rivalled the finest specimens of Yankee comedy. This closed the first day of the convention, and left its members in an enviable state of good humor. But it was not an accident. The Know-nothings had been subjected to pretty rough handling, and many believed that Mr. Greeley's counsel of "caution" and "moderation" had not been duly heeded. It was arranged, accordingly, that "the saw-log man" should be heard, as a diversion from the more serious work of the convention and a means of restoring general harmony and good-will.

When the convention assembled on the second day of its labors considerable time was occupied in listening to ten-minute speeches by representatives of the different states, giving an account of the progress of free principles in the various sections of the Union. A letter was then read from Cassius M. Clay, which was ordered to be printed. He was then in his prime, and it was one of the happiest of his notable public utterances. Its tone was in striking contrast with that of the paper submitted by Mr. Blair. The latter pleaded for moderation, and appealed to the spirit of compromise; but Clay pleaded for political courage and appealed to American manhood, while he invoked the spirit of our republican fathers in facing the despotism of the slave oligarchy. His words were shot and shell. As an impassioned and powerful arraignment of slavery

by a Southern man his letter reminded one of Jefferson's arraignment of George the Third, and through its extensive publication in the newspapers it must have done excellent service in guiding and inspiring the great party then about to be created.

As chairman of the committee on national organization, George W. Julian then submitted the report of that committee, which embodied the following recommendations :

1. The appointment of a national executive committee consisting of one from each state and constituted as follows : E. D. Morgan, New York, chairman ; George G. Fogg, New Hampshire ; N. P. Banks, Massachusetts ; Lawrence Brainerd, Vermont ; John M. Niles, Connecticut ; William Chase, Jr., Rhode Island ; C. M. K. Pollison, New Jersey ; David Wilmot, Pennsylvania ; F. P. Blair, Jr., Missouri ; Rev. J. G. Fee, Kentucky ; A. J. Stevens, Iowa ; A. P. Stone, Ohio ; William Grose, Indiana ; E. D. Leland, Illinois ; Charles Dickey, Michigan ; Wyman Spooner, Wisconsin ; Lewis Clephane, District of Columbia ; ex-Governor Alexander Ramsey, Minnesota.

2. That the National Executive Committee be authorized to add to their number from each state not now represented in said committee, and to fill vacancies.

3. The committee further recommend the holding of a Republican National Convention for the nomination of candidates for President and Vice-President at Philadelphia, on Tuesday, the 17th day of June next, to be composed of delegates from the several states equal in number to twice the representation in Congress to which each state is entitled.

4. That the Republicans of the different states be recommended to complete their organization at the earliest practicable moment by the appointment of state, county and district committees ; and the state and county committees are requested to organize the respective counties by Republican clubs in every town or township throughout the land.

On motion of S. N. Wood, of Kansas, Gen. Charles Robinson of that territory was made an additional member of the National Executive Committee ; and the third recommendation, on the motion of Mr. Lovejoy, was amended so as to make the delegates to the national convention consist of three from each congressional district. The report of the committee on organization as thus amended was adopted, and the national Republican Party became a fact.

Mr. Mann, of New York, from the Committee on Address and Resolutions, now made his report. His address was very lengthy, occupying two hours in the reading, and was a pretty thorough

over-hauling of the slavery question in general, and particularly of the overthrow of the Missouri Compromise and the outrages in Kansas which followed. Its authorship was credited to Henry J. Raymond, of the *New York Times*, and it concluded as follows :

“ We therefore declare to the people of the United States as the objects for which we unite in political action :

“ 1. That we demand and shall attempt to secure the repeal of all laws which allow the introduction of slavery into territory now consecrated to freedom, and will resist by every constitutional means the existence of slavery in any of the territories of the United States ;

“ 2. We will support by every lawful means our brethren in Kansas in their constitutional and manly resistance to the usurped authority of their lawless invaders ; and we will give the full weight of our political power in favor of the immediate admission of Kansas to the Union as a free, sovereign and independent state ;

“ 3. Believing the present national administration has shown itself to be weak and faithless, and as its continuance in power is identified with the progress of the slave power to national supremacy, with the exclusion of freedom from the territories, and with unceasing civil discord, it is a leading purpose of our organization to oppose and overthrow it.”

These declarations might have gone farther, but they were substantially sufficient. They demanded the freedom of Kansas and all our national territories, which meant, of course, the restriction of slavery to the states in which it existed. Such restriction, the slaveholders believed, would pave the way for its destruction. It was because they believed that the Wilmot Proviso threatened slavery with gradual suffocation and ultimate death that they demanded the abrogation of the Missouri Compromise and organized their bloody raid into Kansas. Their policy was the expansion of slavery as the chosen means of saving its life and perpetuating its rule, while the Republican policy was the restriction of slavery as the chosen means of saving the life of the nation and preserving the principles of democracy. No issue could have been more vital, and on this issue a great national party now planted itself and entered upon its stormy career.

This convention represented all of the sixteen northern and eight of the southern states. Its members came together in the dead of winter, when no candidates were to be nominated and no offices were to be divided. Probably a majority of them had passed the meridian of life, but all seemed equally in earnest and absorbed in their work. A few of them were already known to political fame,

such as Joshua R. Giddings, Preston King and David Wilmot, while others, like Zachariah Chandler, Edwin D. Morgan, and Oliver P. Morton, were afterwards to become honorably conspicuous. The great body of the members had never devoted themselves to the business of politics, and this was indicated by the composition of the several committees selected by the convention for the execution of its work. It was a season of unparalleled political chaos, in which doubt and apprehension largely ruled the hour. Good men sometimes lost their way, or saw but dimly the path of safety. Politic statesmen took counsel of their fears. A number of notable men in the convention took little or no part in its proceedings. Many undoubtedly failed to attend because they thought it wiser to wait upon the teaching of events. It was the element of uncalculating radicalism which baffled the policy of timidity and hesitation and saved the cause. Of the nine Free Soilers who held the balance of power in the lower branch of the Congress of 1849, five were in this convention and among its active workers. The convention stood by them. Only five of the northern states had taken the initiative in calling it ; but its members, most fortunately, had the courage of their convictions. Their devotion to the cause and singleness of purpose kept them steadfast. They could have had no conception of the magnitude of the work which they were beginning. They did not dream of the civil war which was to result from the splendid courage of the new party in standing by its principles, nor of the magnificent part it was to play in crushing a great slave-holders' rebellion. As little did they dream of the total extirpation of slavery in the United States in less than nine years, and its abolition throughout the civilized world which was to follow. They were building better than they knew. This was strikingly illustrated by Mr. Greeley's account of the convention in the *Tribune*, in which he said, " its moral and political effect will be felt for a quarter of a century." He did not see the greatness of the work which had been inaugurated, because the angle of his vision left it outside of his horizon ; but he lived to see the curtain lifted, and to realize that the movement in which he had shared involved the life of the Republic, the emancipation of a race, and the grand march of democratic government towards its world-wide triumph.

GEORGE W. JULIAN.